

# Bringing truths about cancer to new audiences

The UICC's Reel Lives film festival showcases 33 of the best

→ Peter McIntyre

When it comes to challenging taboos and giving a voice to ordinary people with extraordinary stories, film can be immensely powerful, as was shown at the first ever Reel Lives: Cancer Chronicles Film Festival, held in Geneva at the end of August.

“I have to say I approached the festival a little cynically,” admitted Linda Garman, one of the winners. “I mean who wants to go and see a film festival about cancer?” She soon changed her mind. “I had an amazing week. I saw that the goal was to make this a life-affirming experience and it certainly worked for me. There were some great films that were obliquely about cancer, but all of them about life.”

Reel Lives, the first ever film festival about cancer, attracted more than 250 entries, of which 33 films from 16 countries were shown in the final competition in Geneva in August, in parallel with the World Cancer Congress. Viewings were well attended and the festival already looks to have established itself.

Silvia Perel Levin, festival producer for the International Union Against Cancer (UICC), said, “Part of the UICC mission is to raise awareness of cancer

and to break the stigma. This UICC film festival provides a critical voice in doing so, using one of the most popular art forms. We wanted to reach out to the general public.”

The variety was extraordinary – from 30-second public service announcements to 90-minute documentaries – and the quality high. *Freeheld*, winner of the Best Short Documentary Oscar in Hollywood, was shown here but did not win. There was a lot of honesty too. These films are full of fight and commitment, but do not all end in victory.

The overall winner, *Chrigu*, is a home-grown story as much about friendship as about cancer. When young Swiss filmmaker Christian Ziorjen (Chrigu) was diagnosed in 2005 with PNET, a form of Ewing's sarcoma, he made a film about his feelings and his treatment. He ended his film by saying that if he ever had to go through treatment again, he would probably kill himself.

But when the cancer returned a few months later, he felt very differently and he turned to his filmmaker friend Jan Gassmann for help. “Let's make a movie together – I'll just drop out at some point,” he told him.

Jan knew little about cancer but a lot about friendship. “The only way I could relate to this topic and understand was that he was my friend and he could explain it so well and tell me his thoughts. The most important thing is to have trust between the two people. We were making a film together like we always did.”

Much of the film was shot around the Inselspital University Hospital in Berne, where Christian was treated until his death in November 2005 at the age of 22, but scenes are intercut from another journey the two had made together three years earlier, making this a film as much about life as about dying.

“Christian said he wants the film to be funny so that people can laugh. That




reel lives  
the cancer chronicles  
UICC FILM FESTIVAL

▲ **Breaking taboos.** Christian Zorjen (Chrigu), a budding young film maker, co-directed the winning film *Chrigu* in the final months before his death aged 22

▶ **Busting myths.** Linda Garman won this Best Reportage award for her film *The Truth About Cancer*, which follows patients with metastatic disease, who know that the odds are stacked against them

is something I was really trying to achieve, because those four months I spent with him at the hospital were not depressing and we had a lot of fun. There were hard times, but I didn't want to give the viewer the feeling that it was all sad."

The film had a cinema release in Switzerland, where it was seen by 20,000 people. The award would have meant a lot to Christian says Jan Gassmann. "He told me he wanted to achieve something to work against this taboo of death. He wanted the film to be seen and it

gave me a good feeling that people talked about it, not only the people usually interested in cancer, but a lot of young people as well."

The Best Reportage film, *The Truth about Cancer*, begins in a similar place to *Chrigu* but makes a very different journey. Linda Garman started to make a film with her husband Larry when he was diagnosed with mesothelioma in January 2000, confident it would be an upbeat story. When, after waves of treatment, he died, what Linda calls her

'naïve faith in medical progress' was swept away.

"As the daughter of a space programme engineer, I had grown up with an unquestioning faith in America's ability to solve problems with science and technology. So nothing, nothing at all, prepared me for what happened 30 years later when my husband died of cancer."

Six years later she went back to the Boston hospitals where her husband had been treated, to ask some probing questions about the nine out of ten

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Real lives. Vinay Charkravarthy, a trainee doctor, featured alongside his wife Rashmi in the film *The Truth About Cancer*. The film leaves the couple optimistic as Vinay has a bone marrow transplant, but after the film was finished, the cancer returned, and Vinay died earlier this year

### OTHER WINNING FILMS

#### Best Personal Story

*The Art of Living*, by Sutapa Biswas, India. Painter Sambhu Das was diagnosed with cancer of the larynx in 1998, but never lost focus on becoming a successful artist

#### Best Film from an Organisation

*Les enfants de l'Avenir*, by Bruno Peyronnet, Morocco.

A child with cancer is cared for at Rabat Children's Hospital and at La Maison de L'Avenir

#### Best Public Service Advertisement

*The Hookah*, by Broadcast, Israel.

Smoke from the hookah (narghile) forms the words *banana*, *apple*, *cherry* and *strawberry*, as the voice-over asks, "In which flavour do you prefer your cancer?"

#### Honourable mentions

*The Breast Cancer Diaries*, by Linda Pattillo, USA.

*Emily's Story*, by Bruce Postman, USA.

*La guerre contre cancer*, by Sylvie Gilman and Thierry de Lestrade, France.

*How Long is a Piece of String?* By David Hayes, Australia.

*Any Questions*, by Mark Dube, Canada.

people with metastatic cancer who do not survive more than five years.

Her 90-minute film is relentlessly honest. It records successes – Glivec and childhood cancers – but mostly it challenges what Garman calls 'the Lance Armstrong myth', that if you fight hard enough and throw enough resources at a problem you will conquer it.

Among the patients featured is Jamie Klayman, who has metastatic pancreatic cancer and faces her disease with a tough candour, entering phase I clinical trials understanding that she is clinging to straws. "It does not seem to be the right thing to just sit and wait and do nothing." She feels a pressure to survive and not 'fail'. Her father insists that it is just a question of finding a doctor with a more positive attitude.

Shortly before her death in November 2007, Jamie says, "I thought about the term 'survivor' and there should be some term for people who struggle and don't make it through. I would hate for people to think that those people who didn't survive didn't want to, or didn't have the will to survive."

This thoughtful and well-researched

documentary film has already been seen by 3.5 million viewers on PBS in the US, and can be viewed online at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/takeonestep/cancer/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/takeonestep/cancer/index.html)

Linda Garman says her main aim was to challenge media myths. "We have a cancer industrial complex here in the United States and the media feed into it, helping the cancer field to hype things that shouldn't be hyped. You have really irresponsible coverage of so called breakthroughs. I am old enough to have lived through several of them, interleukin, interferon, Glivec. It is not that those drugs did not prove to have utility for a small window of cancers; it is just that the way that we cover that in the media is so over the top, and the coverage does not ask the right questions.

"At the other end of the spectrum is the media as personified by the Oprah Winfreys of the world. They invite cancer patients onto their show who say the reason they are alive is because they practice yoga and churn up green drinks in the blender every morning, when in fact those people have treatable forms of cancer with the best that medicine can offer right now.

"At either end of the spectrum, you are doing a huge disservice to the cancer field, to patients and to the decision we make as a society about resources and what we should focus on."

*The Truth about Cancer* is also a story of love, family life and patient–doctor relationships. Linda says, "When they awarded and recognised my film when there were so many other good ones in the festival, I was really overcome. It honours my husband's memory and his family. It was a magic moment."

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